

Spaced Out

The first time I ever traveled from the East coast to the West, the drive entranced me. We were moving from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to Fresno in California's Central Valley. Even though we had our six-month old daughter and my eleven-year old Polish nephew in tow, on whose care we expended a lot of time and attention, I enjoyed our trip. Before we set out, my husband tried to convince me that I should take the kids and fly after he'd driven there by himself. I rejected his suggestion. I wanted to see and learn the landscape of my new country. On the way we stopped to visit my in-laws in Mississippi, but until we went farther west, the surroundings hadn't changed much along the way. It was still the southern countryside, well known to me after my combined four years in Virginia and North Carolina. Soon the distances gradually expanded and the houses grew farther apart, but the little towns we passed were all familiar looking. Each had a bank, a drugstore, a hardware, and at least one church. Once we crossed into Texas, I expected the real West to begin, the West that I thought I knew, since as a child I'd watched a lot of cowboy films with my father, a western movie buff who took me to our town's theater each time a new film with John Wayne or James Stewart was shown. I was convinced I would easily recognize the landscape. But because the camera lens framed the scenery, carving out only a segment of it and in the process diminishing it, the films I saw could never show what the real place looked like.

I was therefore completely unprepared for what I encountered--the immensity of the space, the huge sky, and the unobstructed view all the way to the faraway horizon. We drove for miles without seeing a trace of human settlements--no houses to rest your eyes on, no twinkling lights of people's homes after dusk, the concrete highway the only man made thing between distant towns. Though at first I joked about the regularly posted warnings to buy gas ahead of time, pretty quickly I understood the wisdom of heeding them. Soon we saw the mountains looming ahead, Humphrey's Peak visible for many hours before we actually came close to it. The world looked like it must have thousands of years ago: young, new, unscathed, and unscarred

by human activity. Only the planes flying in the otherwise empty sky were proof of human presence. Nowhere else in America did I have this powerful impression that this indeed is the New World.

If I had hoped we'd be able to get out of the car and stop in the woods by the river, I had to give those hopes up. The terrain was bare, almost moon-like, so the only thing we could do was drive on. When driving--and we drove several hundred miles each day--you normally don't see minutia. The landscape here, though varied on a large scale, collaborated with the idea of car travel and offered almost no small details, as if in its enormity it considered them incidental and useless.

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Since then I have traveled many times by car from California to the east and back, taking different routes, generally more northward, through Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska or Iowa, and each time I was awed by the vastness of the land and its raw and terrible beauty. We tend to think of space as liberating, but its inhuman dimensions overwhelmed and intimidated me. I could admire such landscape as a tourist, but I knew I wouldn't want to live in a place where the horizon is two hundred miles away. I was raised in such a thoroughly different space that I needed the landscape where nature seemed less threatening, and where the smaller size of things would let me believe that this space is tame and domesticated. In Europe it would be impossible to find such vast and uninhabited areas that extend for hundreds of miles. Even the European mountains, at their most distant and wild, look almost homey compared to the American wilderness. But this European space, through the accident of birth, must be deeply ingrained in me. There I feel protected by its smallness and density, by a sense of proximity, by space that encloses instead of opening.

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I see this outward opening in many American towns, those built on a grid, where the streets run along perpendicular and horizontal lines, north-south and east-west, with no center toward which everything turns, where Main Street--the axis, with a bank, a post office, a drugstore, a hardware--doesn't really stop, and could be built up at each end, extended according to need. European towns never had that kind of freedom. They were self-contained,

self-sufficient microcosms, closed in and surrounded by walls intended to protect against the enemy but also to keep the residents within. Since the Middle Ages they have been centrally oriented toward a market square crowned by the cathedral and the town hall. Even the towns which have no medieval layout and which arose later have those types of hubs. When people settled there, they expected to remain for generations and their houses communicated permanence through their brick solidity. American towns extended different promises. Their openness connoted possibility, mobility, freedom, the birthright of the country's inhabitants. One should be able to leave at any moment, "light out for the territory," go wherever one pleased, most often in the direction of the setting sun, toward the Pacific, the vector that for years governed translocation in America to an extent that northward or southward movement didn't, at least not until the Great Migration and its aftermath. Is it any wonder then that Americans invented the mobile home and perfected the European picaresque into a road novel?

Maybe because of their openness American cities are easier to navigate, harder to get lost in. Physically and literally, I have never found myself lost in an American city, yet I often feel lost in what to me is their unfamiliar space. This feeling doesn't just arise because American cities lack architectural landmarks spanning centuries that help me orient myself in Europe or because they exhibit a certain homogeneity which to an outsider makes them look alike. The reason is that not many of them are walking cities, and for me walking is the most important factor in familiarizing myself with alien space. If the space you're in isn't designed for pedestrians, you have no choice but to drive. Driving, though, never builds the kind of connection to and knowledge of the place that comes from bodily immersing yourself in it, noticing details and absorbing them with your senses. Since exploring a place on foot has always been my way of getting to know any new area, during my first years in the United States I walked everywhere. At that time I was fortunate to live in two university towns, where pedestrians were nothing out of the ordinary. When we moved to Fresno, California, a city of about half a million people, I thought I could continue walking. But each time I set off along Blackstone Avenue, some car drivers honked as if I presented an outrageously comical sight. I later found out that only hookers walked that stretch.

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I've always felt comfortable in smaller, more intimate spaces, whether outside or inside. When I was growing up, I never thought we were cramped, even though my family occupied small quarters. Our two rooms and kitchen originally belonged to a larger four-room apartment, which the diligent communist authorities deemed a bourgeois frivolity and hastily partitioned to fit in two families instead of one. At first my grandmother lived there with my aunt and mother. After my mother married, my father moved in with them. The newlyweds occupied the bigger room, my grandmother the smaller one. When I was born, my crib was in my parents' room. Four years later my sister arrived, and all of us lived together until I entered fifth grade.

In college I rented a room from a young woman accountant. It had a built-in closet, a narrow bed, and a desk opposite the window. Two people couldn't have walked side by side along the bed. Did I dream of more space? Never. I had classmates who lived six to a dorm room and envied me my luxury. When on my first trip to the West in 1973, I was invited to an English country house for lunch, I was impressed by its size. In London, though, my English friends lived in crowded rented rooms, not much different from the ones I was used to. Many years later when I had my own apartment, which by American standards would be considered small, its modest size didn't bother me. Some people owned bigger apartments and houses, but the majority of the population lived in ridiculously confined quarters, happy that they had their own place since apartments were also on the list of shortages that plagued our lives.

The first American home I lived in was in Gainesville, Florida. I was staying for one semester with a family of a history professor there. I was amazed at the number of rooms, all assigned a specific function, not the all-purpose rooms we had in Poland. It was a two-story house with five bedrooms, a study with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, a large living room, formal dining room, big kitchen with a breakfast nook, family room, three bathrooms. While to its owners the space was something perfectly normal, to me it was a veritable palace. Someone might think that after returning home, I felt deprived. I didn't, even when I was describing the house to my friends or fondly reminiscing about my stay in America.

After I immigrated to the United States, my sense of space remained rooted in my previous life. At the beginning of 1989 my American husband and I moved into our own house, a three-bedroom Tudor, with one bathroom and a small backyard. I assumed we'd live there for many years to come, but a few years after our second daughter was born, my husband started saying

the house was too small for us. I never felt cooped up in it; I thought we had plenty of room as though I had never outgrown my childhood's predilection for smallness. The next house we bought seemed huge to me—three bedrooms with a large master bedroom, two bathrooms, open floor plan, big yard, though to many Californians it was just medium sized, only 2300 square feet. While I liked our new house, I often missed the intimacy of our previous home whose space, full of nooks and crannies, made me feel soothingly enfolded and swaddled.

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Not that it really matters, but I sometimes wonder to what extent my sense of space is determined by geography or culture, and to what extent it's personal and idiosyncratic. I know, though, what kind of space creates a comfort zone for me. I lived on the West Coast for twenty-one years, yet I never adjusted to California space and the West's extravagant cosmic-like expanse. When we moved to Massachusetts in 2009, I at last ended up in the place I find inviting and can claim as my own. The near horizon line, the smaller distances between towns and buildings, the human size of the surroundings—all of this makes me feel housed and protected. What's more, Boston is a walking city, bustling with pedestrians, not built on a grid, with streets twisting and turning unpredictably every which way. I've always been a city person, and I like being among buildings and walls. I can't imagine myself living out in the wild. I need walls that shield me from nature and help me avoid the distractions of open space. Our house has three floors and many rooms, all of them small compared to the ones we had in California, but it cozily encloses me, helping me focus and sustain my indoor pursuits.